PATTERNS OF POWER

The Field of the Visible

A companion to *What Looks Like Osmosis*

Why the men at the top of every hierarchy can see the other hierarchies and the man at the bottom mostly cannot; how the menu they choose from is built, staffed and paid for; why the thing they copy never comes out looking quite like the original; and why the difference is not failure but the shape of the materials they had to hand

Thomas J. Bryan

with Claude (Anthropic)

Held as tested, not revealed.

THE ARGUMENT IN EIGHT PARTS

Preface

Part I **Two Horizons**

Part II **The Menu Is a Building, Not a Cloud**

Part III **The Adviser**

Part IV **Diffusion Research Found the Same Thing and Named It**

Part V **Selection, Not Only Imitation**

Part VI **The Copy Is Never Exact, and the Deviation Is the Evidence**

Part VII **Against the Whig Reading**

Part VIII **What the Horizon Means**

A Note on Sources

Preface

The claim this paper defends, why the essay it accompanies leaves it standing, and the discipline it keeps

This paper can be read by someone who has met neither the framework it belongs to nor the essay it accompanies. Every term is defined where it first appears, every case is described rather than merely named, and where it leans on a particular scholar it says who that scholar was, what they argued, and where the argument has been challenged.

The essay it accompanies made a claim about the spread of arrangements across the world. Watch forms of rule travel the map — the written constitution, the general staff, the national school system, the census, the central bank — and it is hard not to see a tide: an idea whose time has come, a spirit of the age, a force in the air carrying the form from shore to shore. That essay argued the tide is an illusion of distance, and that what looks from far off like an idea diffusing under its own power is, up close, always the same thing: particular people in particular positions, looking at what has worked elsewhere, judging it would serve them, and choosing to copy it.

This paper takes up the question that argument leaves standing, which is the awkward one. If copying is the mechanism, then somebody has to be able to *see* the thing being copied. And here the world is not evenly lit.

The claim defended below is that the capacity to see other hierarchies is distributed as unequally as anything else an order distributes, and along the same lines. The men at the apex of a hierarchy can see the other apexes, because seeing them is part of the job and because the instruments of seeing — the embassy, the mission, the translated report, the hired adviser, the con-

gress, the son sent abroad to study — are expensive and are bought by whoever can afford them. The man at the bottom, for most of history and in most places, could not, because his field of vision ended at a distance measured in a day's walk, and nothing in his position gave him any reason or means to extend it. He might have heard of other countries. He had, in general, no way of knowing what they had done about the problem he was living inside.

Two things follow, and the paper spends itself on them.

The first is that this asymmetry, and not any difference of intelligence or virtue, is the deep reason a functioning order is changed by its elites rather than by its people. To break an arrangement you need only know that it is unbearable, and the man at the bottom knows that better than anybody. To *build* one you need to know what else there is — you need a menu — and the menu is not in the field of the visible from where he stands.

The second is that when a template does get copied, it never comes out looking quite like the original, and the difference is not a botch. A conqueror, a minister, a founder does not have the option of importing an arrangement whole. He has the option of building something out of what is lying about in his own country — the officials he actually has, the money he can actually raise, the beliefs his population will actually accept, the previous conquest's apparatus still sitting there in working order. The copy is bent by the materials at hand, and the bending is the most informative thing in the record, because it tells you what was really available and what problem was really being solved.

Against both stands a way of reading history this paper is written to refuse: the habit of treating the spread of an arrangement as the advance of an idea, of scoring the past by how far each actor got toward the present, and of filing every deviation from the model as backwardness or failure. That habit has a name and a critic, and it is met head-on in Part VII.

The paper keeps the discipline of its companions. It holds the strongest version of the opposing case rather than a convenient

one. It qualifies itself where it would otherwise slide into a crudeness as false as the idealism it corrects. And it ends in a recognition rather than a remedy, because to name the force that drives history is already to claim a destination, and this account has none to offer.

PART I

Two Horizons

How far an ordinary person could actually see, how far the men running the same country could see, and why the difference is a fact about position rather than about character

The distance a man could see

Begin with the ordinary case, because the extraordinary one is easier and less instructive.

For most of recorded history, and in most places, the world an ordinary person could actually observe was small. Not metaphorically small — literally bounded, by the distance a man could walk out and back in a day, by the market town he took a pig to, by the parish he was baptised in, by the fair he went to twice a year. Beyond that he had rumour, the tax collector, the recruiting sergeant, and whatever a priest or a pedlar chose to tell him. He was not ignorant. He knew an enormous amount about his own field of vision, generally more than any official above him, and about the things inside it — soil, weather, prices, the character of his neighbours, the reliability of the local notable — he was often the best-informed person available. What he lacked was not knowledge. It was *comparison*.

The best-documented case is also the most surprising, because it comes from a country that had been a centralised state for centuries and is usually taken as the model of one. The historian Eugen Weber, in a study published in 1976 called *Peasants into Frenchmen*, examined rural France between 1870 and 1914 and found something that startled his profession: that the French countryside was not yet French. As late as 1863, on the government's own survey, close to a quarter of the population of France spoke no French at all — they spoke Breton, Basque,

Flemish, German, or one of the many regional tongues collectively dismissed as *patois*. Large districts had no usable roads. Money was scarce enough that many exchanges were still in kind. The state appeared in the village mainly in its three least attractive forms — the tax collector, the gendarme and the conscription officer — and was regarded accordingly. Weber's argument was that what turned these people into Frenchmen was not the Revolution of 1789 and not some awakening national spirit, but roads, railways, schools, military service and markets, applied deliberately over about two generations after 1870.

Weber's book has been argued with since — the historians Miguel Cabo and Fernando Molina, reviewing thirty years of criticism in 2009, note that his model has been faulted for treating the countryside as passive and for drawing too sharp a line between a traditional before and a modern after, and comparable studies in other European countries have found the process messier and more two-way than he described. The criticisms are worth registering and they do not touch the point being borrowed here. Even Weber's severest critics do not claim that a Breton farmer in 1860 had any working knowledge of what the Prussian state was doing about its schools.

That is the horizon. It was not empty, and it was not stupid. It was *local*, and locality is a bound on comparison.

The distance the men at the top could see

Now set beside it the horizon of the people running the same country in the same decade.

They corresponded with their counterparts abroad. They maintained permanent embassies whose reason for existing was to report what other governments were doing. They read translated documents prepared by paid translators. They married into other dynasties, or arranged marriages into them. They had been educated in a literate international — Latin in

medieval Europe, classical Chinese across East Asia, Persian across a great swathe of Asia, Arabic across the Islamic world — which meant they could read what men in other polities had written and did not need the local vernacular to do it. When something new appeared, they knew about it, and they generally knew about it fast.

This is not a claim about the modern era only. A twelfth-century European bishop knew more about what was happening in Rome than a peasant three villages away knew about the next diocese. A Ryūkyūan official in the seventeenth century, on an island of a hundred thousand people, corresponded with a court in Fuzhou and a magistracy in Kagoshima, and knew the terms on which each of them dealt. What changed with the nineteenth century was not the existence of the asymmetry but its intensity and its speed: the telegraph, the steamship, the printed report and the international congress made the apex's field of vision continental and then global, while for a long time leaving the ordinary man's field of vision very much where it had been.

Position, not character

It is important to be exact about what is being claimed, because the claim is easy to hear as a slur on ordinary people and is not one.

The difference is not curiosity. Ordinary people are intensely curious and always have been; the demand for news, gossip and traveller's tales is one of the oldest in the record. The difference is not intelligence, and anyone who has spent time with a skilled farmer or a competent sergeant knows better than to suggest otherwise. The difference is not even, strictly, information: rumours of other countries travelled far and fast, and a village could know that the English had a king or that the Russians had freed their serfs.

The difference is *usable comparative vision*, and it is a function of position in exactly the sense this framework means. To

compare arrangements you need to know not that another country exists but how, specifically, it handles the problem you are dealing with — what its instrument is, what it cost, whether it worked, what it required in order to work. That knowledge is expensive. It is produced by people sent to look, kept in files, translated, argued over, and paid for out of a treasury. It is produced, in other words, by an apparatus, and the apparatus belongs to whoever is running the place.

The apex sees the other apexes because seeing them is one of its functions and because it holds the instruments of seeing. The man at the bottom does not, because nothing in his position provides either the reason or the means. That is the asymmetry, and everything else in this paper follows from it.

PART II

The Menu Is a Building, Not a Cloud

What the apex's comparative vision is actually made of, what it cost to build, and why naming the apparatus leaves the spirit of the age with nothing left to do

The spirit of the age has an address

If the apex's comparative vision is produced by an apparatus, the apparatus should be visible. It is, and looking at it is the most direct way to dissolve the impression of a force in the air, because the force turns out to have a budget line.

Take the case where the record is fullest. In December 1871, three years after a coup had overthrown its previous government, the new Japanese state sent abroad an expedition that has no real parallel in the history of any other country. The Iwakura Mission — named for Iwakura Tomomi, the court noble who led it — sailed from Yokohama on 23 December 1871 and did not return until 13 September 1873, twenty-one months later. Its senior membership was not a delegation of specialists. It was the government. Iwakura took with him as vice-ambassadors Ōkubo Toshimichi, Kido Takayoshi and Itō Hirobumi — that is, three of the four or five men who actually ran Japan — together with commissioners representing each department of the central bureaucracy. The party numbered forty-six or forty-eight officials, with something like eighteen attendants and forty-three students, about a hundred and seven people in all. It crossed the United States and then toured twelve European countries, visiting on one account a hundred and twenty cities and settlements, inspecting parliaments, courts, arsenals, mints, shipyards,

factories, prisons, schools and newspapers, and conferring with monarchs, ministers, industrialists and professors. It is said to have cost something in the region of a million dollars of the money of the day. The record of what they saw was published in 1878 in five volumes.

Consider what that is. A government took half its own senior leadership out of the country for the better part of two years, at enormous expense, at a moment of acute domestic instability, to go and look at how other people did things. Nobody does that to absorb a spirit. They did it because they had a set of concrete problems — an unequal treaty regime that placed foreigners on Japanese soil outside Japanese jurisdiction, an army that could not have resisted a serious European force, a fiscal system that did not work — and they wanted to see what instruments were available.

Note also who stayed at home and what he could see. In the same years, a Japanese farmer in a mountain village was rioting against a conscription proclamation because he had understood the phrase "blood tax" literally. His field of vision and Ōkubo's were not in the same order of magnitude, and the difference had been purchased.

What the apparatus is made of

The mission is a spectacular instance of an ordinary category. The apparatus of comparative vision, across the nineteenth century and in general, is made of identifiable, fundable things.

There is the **permanent embassy**, whose despatches are a running report on another government's arrangements. There is the **mission of observation**, of which Iwakura's is the largest but by no means the only example; almost every modernising state sent them, and the reports came back and were read. There are the **students sent abroad**, who return in twenty years as ministers, having spent their formative period inside

another country's institutions. There are the **military attachés**, whose entire function is to watch someone else's army. There are the **translated books**, and behind them the more consequential fact of *who chose what to translate* — a small number of officials and scholars deciding which foreign arrangements the domestic elite would be able to read about at all.

There are the **international congresses**, which multiplied from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards and covered statistics, prisons, public health, postal arrangements, weights and measures, and — pertinently for this framework — colonial administration. There are the **expositions**, the great world's fairs, which were among other things a competitive display of national arrangements to an audience of other nations' officials. And there is the **university chair**: by the end of the century, several countries had endowed professorships in colonial administration or colonial policy, which is to say they had institutionalised the comparative study of how other people governed their possessions and made it a subject with textbooks, examinations and a career path.

The historian John Hennessey, in a study of Japan's participation in all of this published in 2018, calls the resulting structure a *global trans-imperial culture* — a shared knowledge infrastructure of congresses, scholarly exchange and expositions through which the colonial powers of the age co-produced the discourses and practices of rule. His argument, which is developed further in Part V of this paper, is that this was not a case of a Western template being imperfectly copied by a latecomer, but of a conversation in which Japan was a participant from early on. What matters here is the more basic point his evidence establishes: that the thing which looks from a distance like an atmosphere was, in fact, a set of institutions with premises, proceedings and attendance lists.

The point of saying so

Naming the apparatus does something specific to the mystical account, and it is worth being precise about what.

A spirit of the age, an idea whose time has come, a tide of progress — these are all explanations that do not require anybody to have done anything. They work by attributing agency to the arrangement itself. The moment you can name the ship, the passenger list, the cost, the twelve countries and the five volumes of notes, the explanation loses its work. There is nothing left for the spirit to do. The information got from there to here because a government spent a million dollars sending a hundred and seven people to fetch it.

And the apparatus explains the asymmetry as well as the transmission. It is expensive. Only the apex can buy it. So the menu of available arrangements is, quite literally, a possession — held by the people who paid for it, consulted by them, and invisible to everybody else.

PART III

The Adviser

The template in human form, hired on a contract at a price by a man who already had the problem, and the competition of 1895 in which three foreigners wrote three briefs and one of them was chosen

The template with a face

The most concrete form the menu takes is a man who gets off a boat with a contract in his pocket.

The hired foreign expert is a familiar figure in the history of every modernising state, and he is usually written up as a carrier of enlightenment — the Westerner who brought the railway, the code, the school. That framing has the causation backwards, and correcting it is one of the more useful things this paper can do.

Look at the actual transactions. In 1871 the Japanese government hired **Horace Capron**, then Commissioner of Agriculture of the United States, to advise on the colonisation of its northern island. Capron was sixty-seven, was paid ten thousand dollars a year — an extraordinary sum — and had earlier in his career been assigned by President Fillmore to the relocation of Native American tribes after the Mexican War. He was not hired because he embodied progress. He was hired because the Japanese government had decided to plant a settler population on an island inhabited by a hunting people and wanted somebody who had done that before.

In 1872 the same government hired **Charles Le Gendre**, a French-born American who had been the United States consul at Amoy. Le Gendre supplied the international-law argument that the indigenous southeast of Taiwan lay outside the jurisdiction

of the Chinese empire and was therefore open to annexation, and he effectively planned the punitive expedition Japan sent there in 1874. He was not hired to explain international law in general. He was hired because a specific argument was wanted for a specific piece of ground.

And in 1895, when Japan acquired Taiwan by treaty and had to decide how to govern it, the body charged with the question — the Taiwan Affairs Bureau, chaired by the prime minister Itō Hirobumi — did something that lays the whole mechanism bare. It commissioned written opinions from three foreign legal advisers already on the Japanese payroll. **Michel Revon**, a French jurist, argued for the French approach: assimilation, with the new territory brought under the metropolitan constitution and administered as an extension of Japan proper. **William Montague Kirkwood**, a British lawyer advising the Ministry of Justice, argued for the British approach of *association*: a separate legal order, a governor-general with wide discretionary power, and rule conducted so far as possible through the institutions already on the ground. **Henry Willard Denison**, the long-serving American adviser to the Foreign Ministry, was also consulted. The bureau read, in addition, the Canadian constitutional writer Alpheus Todd on parliamentary government in the British colonies. Hara Takashi, later prime minister, wrote a response on the assimilationist side and lost.

Kirkwood's recommendation was adopted, and on his advice the Japanese parliament passed, in March 1896, the statute conferring on the Governor-General of Taiwan the power to issue ordinances having the force of law in the territory.

That is the demonstration effect with the paperwork attached. Three briefs, three models, one decision, one enabling act. Nobody absorbed anything. A government with a problem paid three foreigners to describe the available answers and then picked one.

Who is steering

The decisive evidence that the adviser is an instrument rather than an agent is the way advisers were managed.

The Japanese government's treatment of its hired foreigners — the *oyatoi*, as they were called — was, on the account of the historian Hazel Jones, tightly controlled and frankly instrumental. After early experience with forged credentials and unfamiliar Western employment contracts, officials moved to careful contracts and background checks. The expense was borne entirely by the state and was regarded as a burden. Generalists were dispensed with from the mid-1880s and only specialists retained. And the standing policy was to replace foreigners with Japanese, trained abroad or at home, as fast as this could be done.

You do not manage a source of enlightenment that way. You manage a supplier that way. The relationship the record shows is a purchaser hiring expertise for a defined job, on terms, with an exit.

Two more cases make the same point from other directions. When Japan came to write a constitution, Itō Hirobumi went to Europe in 1882 and spent his time principally with German and Austrian jurists — Rudolf von Gneist in Berlin, Lorenz von Stein in Vienna — and the German legal scholar **Hermann Roesler** was subsequently central to the drafting. The choice of Germany was not an accident of intellectual fashion. Japan's leaders wanted a constitution that would satisfy foreign observers that the country was a law-governed state, while leaving executive power substantially where it already was, and Prussia had a demonstrated model of exactly that. Meanwhile the French jurist **Gustave Boissonade** spent more than twenty years drafting Japanese criminal and civil codes, and the civil code he produced was, after a fierce domestic controversy, substantially set aside in favour of one drawing more heavily on German models.

That last fact is the tell. When the imported instrument did not suit, it was rejected — after two decades of work by the most

eminent foreign jurist in the country. Advisers propose. Position disposes.

PART IV

Diffusion Research Found the Same Thing and Named It

How the empirical study of spreading, looking closely at itself, found that adoption tracks position in a communication structure — and gave the finding a name

There is a body of empirical research devoted precisely to how new things spread, and it is worth bringing in, because it is the natural home of the osmosis metaphor and it contains, inside itself, the finding that undoes the metaphor.

The field is called diffusion of innovations, and its standard reference is Everett Rogers' book of that title, first published in 1962 and revised repeatedly since. Rogers synthesised several thousand studies of how new practices spread — hybrid seed corn among Iowa farmers, new drugs among physicians, boiled drinking water in Peruvian villages, contraception, agricultural machinery — and produced a general model. Adoption over time follows an S-shaped curve, slow at first, then steep, then levelling. Adopters can be sorted into categories by how early they take a thing up. And the spread is carried by communication through a social system, in which certain individuals — Rogers called them opinion leaders — are disproportionately influential, and in which outside change agents play a specific role.

The finding that matters here is one of Rogers' generalisations about who adopts early. Earlier adopters, across an enormous range of studies, score higher on what the literature calls *cosmopoliteness* — the degree to which an individual is oriented outside their immediate social system. They travel more, they

have more contact beyond the local network, they consume more media originating outside the community, and they are more often in touch with change agents from outside it. Early adoption is not principally a trait of temperament. It is a position in a communication structure.

Turn that finding on states and it says exactly what this paper says. The apex of a hierarchy is the most cosmopolite position in the society, by an enormous margin and by construction, because the instruments of external orientation are institutional and it holds them. It is therefore where adoption happens, and it would be where adoption happened even if the people occupying it were of merely average curiosity.

The organisational literature reaches the same place by a different road. In 1983 the sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell published a paper asking why organisations in the same field come to resemble each other so strongly, and distinguished three mechanisms. *Coercive* isomorphism is imitation under pressure from another organisation on which one depends, or from the state. *Mimetic* isomorphism is imitation under uncertainty — when goals are ambiguous and the environment is unclear, organisations copy peers they perceive as successful, and they do it for legitimacy rather than because the copied form has been demonstrated to work better. *Normative* isomorphism comes from professionalisation: people trained in the same way, belonging to the same associations, moving between organisations, carry the same repertoire with them and install it wherever they land.

The companion essay to this one uses the mimetic mechanism as its engine, and rightly. The third mechanism is what this paper has been describing. The missions, the students sent abroad, the international congresses, the endowed chairs in colonial policy, the hired advisers who train their own replacements — that is the manufacture of a shared professional repertoire across a set of otherwise rival hierarchies. It is normative

isomorphism being deliberately built, and paid for, by the people who benefit from it.

The point of enlisting all this is not that the social sciences have proved the argument. It is narrower and more useful. The research tradition most invested in the idea that things spread found, when it looked closely, that spreading tracks position in a communication structure — which is to say it found the hands, and named them.

PART V

Selection, Not Only Imitation

The strongest rival account, in which nobody needs to see anything because whoever failed to converge was destroyed, stated at full strength and answered with a distinction

The strongest objection to everything above does not come from the mystical account. It comes from a rival material account, and it is a serious one that must be stated at full strength.

The objection

On this view, states did not converge on similar arrangements because their rulers saw and admired each other. They converged because the ones that failed to converge were destroyed.

The historical sociologist Charles Tilly made this argument for the European state most influentially, in a body of work whose slogan is that war made the state and the state made war. Tilly's account is roughly this. Rulers in early modern Europe faced constant armed competition. Waging war required money; extracting money required an apparatus of assessment, collection and enforcement; building that apparatus required bargaining with the people being taxed, which produced representative institutions and eventually citizenship. Polities that built the apparatus survived and absorbed those that did not. Enormous numbers of political units that had existed in 1500 — hundreds of them — simply ceased to exist. The survivors look alike not

because they copied a template but because a common environment eliminated everything that did not fit it.

This is Darwinian rather than imitative, and it is powerful, because it needs nobody to see anything at all. Variation can be generated blindly. The environment does the selecting. On this account the apparent spread of the national fiscal-military state is not a spread. It is a die-off.

The answer, which is a concession and a distinction

The objection is largely right and does not do what it needs to do to displace the argument here, because selection and imitation are not rivals. They are sequential, and each explains what the other cannot.

What selection explains is the *penalty*: why a ruler who does nothing about a competitor's new arrangement suffers, and why the pressure to change is not optional. What it does not explain is where the replacement comes from. A state under military pressure that cannot see an alternative does not thereby invent one. It loses. Selection can eliminate what is unfit; it cannot supply what is fit. Something has to put the successful variant into the choice set, and the something is exactly the apparatus described in Part II.

The historical record supports the distinction very directly, and in a way that is hard to explain on selection alone. If elimination were doing all the work, we would not expect to find governments spending fortunes in advance on the acquisition of comparative knowledge. But that is precisely what we find: a mission that cost a million dollars and took the government abroad for twenty-one months; standing embassies whose despatches are policy inventories; students despatched at public expense for decades before there was any post for them to fill; three foreign lawyers paid to write competing briefs on how to govern an island. These are purchases of *foresight*, and you

make them only if you believe that seeing in advance is better than being selected against.

There is a further point, and it is the one that most clearly requires the field-of-vision argument. Selection accounts predict convergence in the presence of competition. They do not predict *which* of several available answers a given ruler takes. In 1895 Japan could have governed Taiwan on the French model or the British; both were available, both were in use by successful powers, and neither would have got Japan conquered. The choice fell the way it did because of who was in the room, what they had read, whose brief was more persuasive to a bureau chaired by a particular man, and what the incoming government could actually afford to administer. Selection sets the exam. It does not fill in the paper.

The honest formulation is therefore this. Competitive pressure explains why hierarchies cannot afford to ignore what other hierarchies do. The field of the visible explains what they are able to consider when they can no longer afford to ignore it. And the materials at hand — which is Part VI — explain what actually comes out.

PART VI

The Copy Is Never Exact, and the Deviation Is the Evidence

Why an imported arrangement always changes shape, why the change is systematic rather than accidental, and why it is very nearly the whole of the signal

What actually happens when a template is imported

Follow any imported arrangement into the country that imported it and the same thing happens: it changes shape. This is so regular that it deserves to be treated as a law of the phenomenon rather than as a series of local accidents.

The best-documented account is again Japanese, and it comes from the political scientist D. Eleanor Westney's study *Imitation and Innovation*, published in 1987, which followed three Western organisational patterns into Meiji Japan: the police, the postal system and the mass-circulation newspaper. Westney's finding was not that the Japanese copied well or badly. It was that copying is not a thing that can be done cleanly, because a model is not a portable object.

The police case shows the mechanism in miniature. The first Western-style force, set up in Tokyo in 1871 under Kawaji Toshiyoshi, was built on a British model that had reached Japan indirectly, through the foreign settlements at Yokohama and in China. Kawaji was then sent to Europe in 1872 to look properly,

and on his return the French model was adopted instead. German practice subsequently shaped the training system. So what emerged was not a copy of anything; it was a composite assembled from three sources over a decade. And it differed from all three in a specific and revealing way: because Japan had no pre-existing police institution to accommodate, the new force came out *more* centralised and more standardised than any of its models, and had a correspondingly larger presence in society. The deviation was not a failure to reproduce the original. It was the direct consequence of there being nothing in the way.

The postal case shows the other half. The British postal model was adopted under Maejima Hisoka, and the organisational form transferred without much difficulty; but integrating it with Japan's regulatory structures and local administration threw up problems that, on Westney's account, took decades to resolve and materially slowed the system's expansion. The parts of an arrangement that travel easily are the ones that are self-contained. The parts that jam are the ones that have to mesh with institutions the exporting country never had to think about, because they were simply there.

Backwardness as an input, not a deficiency

The most useful theoretical statement of this comes from the economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron, in essays collected in 1962 under the title *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, and it is worth setting out because it inverts the intuition most readers start with.

Gerschenkron's subject was why late-industrialising countries did not simply repeat the path Britain had taken. His answer was that they could not, and did not try. A latecomer faces a different problem: the technology available to it is the technology of its own day, which is more capital-intensive and larger in scale than what the pioneer began with, and it lacks the things the pioneer accumulated slowly along the way — a deep capital

market, an entrepreneurial class, a supply of trained labour. So it *substitutes*. Where Britain had financed industry out of retained profits and private wealth, Germany financed it through large investment banks which took a directing role. Where Germany had banks, Russia, being later and poorer still, used the state itself. The substitution was systematic: the greater the degree of backwardness, the more the missing prerequisites were replaced by concentrated institutional instruments, and the more the industrialisation came in a sudden spurt rather than a long ascent.

Two things in that argument matter here. The first is that the deviation from the model was not error. It was a rational response to a different endowment, and it was predictable from the endowment. The second is that lateness was not only a handicap. Gerschenkron's phrase — the advantage of backwardness — captures the point that the latecomer can skip intermediate stages and adopt the best current technology directly, precisely because it is copying rather than inventing.

Read that across from economics to arrangements of rule and it is the whole of what this paper means by *materials at hand*. A ruler importing an institution is not attempting a reproduction and failing. He is solving his own problem, with his own endowment, using a foreign design as a source of ideas about what is possible — and the endowment includes the officials he actually has, the revenue he can actually raise, the beliefs his population will actually accept, the previous conquest's apparatus still standing there in working order, and the political debts he has to pay.

Why the deviation is the most informative part of the record

This turns a nuisance into an instrument.

If a copied arrangement matched its model, it would tell you only that somebody had copied. Because it never

matches, the difference between model and outcome is a readout of the local situation — and it is readable in a way the local situation often is not, because the model provides a baseline against which to measure.

Where an imported institution comes out more centralised than its original, ask what was absent that would have decentralised it. Where it comes out weaker, ask who had the power to weaken it and what they were protecting. Where a whole component of the model is quietly dropped, ask what that component would have cost and who would have paid. Where two models are spliced, ask which faction wanted which half. The deviations are not noise around a signal. In a study of any borrowed institution, they are very nearly the entire signal, because they are where the local balance of forces left its marks.

PART VII

Against the Whig Reading

The habit of scoring the past by how far it got toward the present, why that habit requires ideas to be the drivers, and the concession it is owed

The habit and its critic

There is a way of writing history that the foregoing is inconsistent with, and it should be named, described fairly, and then met.

In 1931 the English historian Herbert Butterfield published a short and consequential book called *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Its target was a habit he saw in the dominant historiography of his own country, which had told the national past as a long ascent toward parliamentary liberty and Protestant constitutionalism. Butterfield's objection was methodological rather than political. The habit, he argued, works by studying the past *with reference to the present*: it selects from the record those actors and events that can be seen as contributing to the arrangements we now have, sorts historical figures into those who advanced the story and those who obstructed it, and reads earlier periods through categories that only make sense later. Its characteristic errors are abridgement that flatters the outcome, the projection of present concerns onto people who did not have them, and the treatment of what actually happened as what was bound to happen.

The name stuck, and "Whig history" is now the general term for any account that reads the past as a march toward the present. It is worth stressing that Butterfield was not defending

any particular set of villains. He was making a point about method: that the historian's job is to understand a past moment in its own terms, and that organising the past around the question of how we got here systematically distorts it.

Why the Whig reading needs ideas to be the drivers

The connection to this paper is direct, and it explains why the two accounts cannot both be right.

A Whig reading requires history to have a direction, and a direction requires a driver. The natural driver, and the one such accounts almost always reach for, is the idea: liberty, reason, progress, enlightenment, the rights of man, the modern. Once the idea is the driver, three things follow automatically. Adoption becomes *enlightenment* — a people or a ruler seeing the truth at last. Non-adoption becomes *backwardness* — a failure to see it, from ignorance, superstition or vested interest. And deviation from the model becomes *imperfect implementation* — the idea arriving in a place not yet ready to receive it properly.

Every one of those three is destroyed by the account given here.

Adoption is a purchase, not an awakening. The Meiji government did not see the light about constitutions; it wanted its extraterritoriality regime revised, was told by the powers that legal reform was the price, and went shopping for a constitutional design that would satisfy foreign observers while leaving executive power where it was. It found one in Prussia. That is a procurement decision, and describing it as an awakening does not merely flatter it — it makes the actual reasoning invisible, which is the loss.

Non-adoption is usually a judgement, not a failure. The companion essay makes the general point: arrangements that were demonstrably available, known and to some eyes plainly

superior sat unadopted for centuries where no positioned actor found them useful. This paper adds a distinction the general point can obscure. There are two very different reasons an arrangement does not spread, and the Whig reading collapses them into one. The first is that nobody in a position to install it could *see* it. The second is that they saw it perfectly well and declined. The first is a fact about the apparatus of vision; the second is a fact about interest. Only the second is a choice, and it is far commoner than the backwardness story allows — a ruler who has read the report, understood the instrument, and concluded that installing it would cost him more than it gained him is not benighted. He has done the arithmetic and got a different answer.

Deviation is a constraint, not an incompetence. This is where the Whig reading does the most damage, because it converts the single most informative feature of any borrowing into an embarrassment to be explained away. The Japanese police came out more centralised than the French. On the Whig reading that is a distortion, a failure to receive the model properly, evidence of an authoritarian streak or an incomplete modernity. On the reading offered here it is a datum: there was no prior police institution to accommodate, so nothing bent the new one, and the fact tells you something true about Japan in 1874 that the model itself could never have told you.

The concession the argument owes

Having said all that, the Whig reading is not stupid, and an account that cannot say why it is tempting has not understood it.

There is something real underneath it. Some instruments genuinely are better than others at solving a problem that many hierarchies share, and a genuinely better instrument will be adopted more often, in more places, and will tend to displace its predecessors. Double-entry bookkeeping really is a superior

technology for knowing what a firm owns. A general staff really is a better way of planning a campaign than a council of nobles. A germ theory of disease really does keep more people alive than a miasma theory. When such an instrument spreads widely, the spread has a real directionality to it that is not merely the accidental sum of interests, and an account which denied this would be perverse.

The distinction that must be held is between direction and destination, and between what the two accounts can predict.

Direction is local and real: given a shared problem and an instrument that measurably solves it better, expect the instrument to spread. Destination is the further claim — that the whole of history is going somewhere, that the sequence of arrangements has an end state, that later is nearer to the truth. That claim does not follow from the first, and nothing in the record supports it.

And the two accounts have very different predictive reach. The Whig account can tell you the direction and nothing else. It cannot tell you *when* an available instrument will be taken up, or *where*, or *by whom*, or *in what altered form*, or *why it will sit unused for two centuries in a country that knows all about it*. The position account answers all of those, and answers them with the same apparatus: whoever could see it, whoever it served, whatever they had to hand.

PART VIII

What the Horizon Means

Why the man at the bottom can break but cannot build, what has changed since the horizons began to narrow, and the recognition offered in place of a remedy

Why the man at the bottom can break but not build

Return now to the two horizons of Part I, because the asymmetry turns out to explain something the companion essay establishes but does not fully account for.

That essay argues, following the sociologist Theda Skocpol's comparative study of the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions, that functioning states are not overthrown from below. Skocpol's finding was that social revolutions cannot be explained by the will of the masses or the ideology of revolutionaries alone; they occur when a state has already broken at the top, under military pressure from outside and fiscal strain within, with its ruling class divided — and the mass action pours through a crack that was already there. Revolutions, in the formulation her work is remembered by, are not willed; they occur when the structures align.

That is the structural half of the answer. The field of the visible is the other half, and it addresses the question Skocpol's account raises but does not answer: once the crack has opened and the crowd has poured through, why is the new order still built by elites?

The answer this paper offers is that breaking and building have different informational requirements, and only one of them can be met from the bottom.

To break an arrangement you need to know one thing: that it is intolerable. That knowledge is available at the bottom in its most reliable and most immediate form — better there, in fact, than anywhere else in the hierarchy, because the man who is paying the cost knows the cost. Nothing about a local horizon prevents anybody from knowing that.

To build one you need to know something else entirely: what the alternatives are, which have been tried, what each of them requires in order to work, and what happened to the people who installed them. That is comparative knowledge, and comparative knowledge lives in the apparatus described in Part II — an apparatus the crowd does not own, did not build, and in most of history could not read.

So when a state breaks, the replacement comes out of somebody's head, and it is whichever head had a menu in it. Very often it is a faction of the old elite, or the men their institutions trained, or a counter-elite educated in the same places and reading the same reports. The crowd supplies the force that makes a change possible. It does not supply the design, not because it lacks the wit but because the design is drawn from a set of options that was never in its field of vision. This is the least romantic proposition in the framework and, one suspects, the most durable.

What has changed, stated carefully

An account like this owes the reader an honest statement of what happens to it under modern conditions, because the conditions have changed more in the last century and a half than in the previous thousand years.

The asymmetry of vision has narrowed enormously, and it narrowed in stages: cheap print, then the telegraph, then mass lit-

eracy and the newspaper, then broadcast, then the network. An ordinary person today can watch another country's arrangements operate in something close to real time, can compare their own conditions against a dozen other places without leaving a chair, and can find out in an afternoon what a nineteenth-century foreign ministry would have sent a mission abroad for two years to learn. Whatever else is true, the field of the visible is no longer the possession of the apex in the way it was in 1870.

What has *not* obviously narrowed is the asymmetry of installation. Seeing an arrangement and being able to put one in place are different capacities, and only the first has been democratised. A population can now know with precision that some other country handles a problem better, and still have no lever with which to install the better arrangement, because installing arrangements requires control of instruments — a legislature, a ministry, a treasury, an army — that remain where they were.

It would be easy, and unwarranted, to draw a conclusion from that. This paper draws none, and offers instead a question it thinks is genuinely open: whether a wide gap between what a population can see and what it can do is a stable condition or an unstable one, and whether the closing of the first gap without the second produces mainly frustration, mainly pressure, or mainly a new and more effective form of the old management. The framework has no answer, and an account that manufactured one would be doing exactly what Part VII was written to refuse.

The recognition

So the argument can be set down for what it is.

What looks like a tide is people copying. That was the companion essay's finding. This paper adds the two things that make the copying intelligible.

The first is that the copying is done by the people who can see, and that seeing is a possession — produced by embassies

and missions and translations and hired advisers and congresses, bought with public money, held at the top, and for most of history invisible from below. When some arrangement seems to sweep the world as if by a force in the air, the useful question is not what the force was but *who could see it, and what it was costing them to look*.

The second is that what comes out at the other end is built from whatever was lying about. No conqueror, no minister, no founder ever imported an arrangement whole, because arrangements are not portable. He made something out of the officials he had, the money he could raise, the beliefs his people would swallow and the machinery the last order left standing — and the difference between what he copied and what he built is not a measure of how far he fell short. It is a description of what he had.

There is no force in the air, and there is no destination. There are hierarchies, and men at the top of them who can see each other across the distance because seeing each other is part of the job, and men at the bottom of them whose horizon ends at the market town — and between the two, an apparatus of vision that somebody paid for. To see the apparatus is to stop needing the spirit. That is the recognition, and it is offered, as always, in place of a remedy.

A Note on Sources

Where every load-bearing specific came from, and where this account has taken something at one remove

This paper verified its load-bearing specifics against the scholarship rather than asserting them from memory. A reader who wishes to go further should go to the following, and should also note where this account has taken something at one remove.

On the horizon of the ordinary person, Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, 1976), which reports that as late as 1863 close to a quarter of the population of France spoke no French, and argues that roads, railways, schools, markets and military service made the countryside French across the two generations after 1870. Weber's model has been substantially criticised — see Miguel Cabo and Fernando Molina's review of thirty years of that criticism in *European History Quarterly* (2009), which faults the sharpness of his traditional-to-modern division and his treatment of rural populations as passive, and sets his findings against comparable work elsewhere in Europe. The point borrowed here survives the criticism; the reader should nonetheless not take Weber as settled.

On the Iwakura Mission, the accounts published by the National Diet Library of Japan, Keio University and Nippon.com, which agree on the essentials: departure from Yokohama on 23 December 1871, return on 13 September 1873, forty-six delegates (some sources give forty-eight) with about eighteen attendants and forty-three students, the United States and twelve European countries, and a five-volume record published in 1878. The figures for cities visited (about a hundred and twenty) and

for cost (of the order of a million dollars of the day) are as reported in that literature and have not been traced to a primary account.

On the trans-imperial apparatus, John L. Hennessey, *Rule by Association: Japan in the Global Trans-Imperial Culture, 1868–1912* (Linnaeus University, 2018), which argues that the colonial powers of the period co-produced a common knowledge infrastructure of congresses, scholarly exchange and expositions, and that Japan participated in it from early on rather than copying from outside it. This paper has read Hennessey's introduction and contents and not his case chapters; his chapter on the Western advice given on Taiwan is where the material in Part III is treated at length, and he published the French portion separately as "Assimilation, Association and French Advice to Japan on how to Rule Taiwan," *French Colonial History* 18 (2019), 101–128.

On the advisers. Horace Capron's hiring, salary and earlier assignment under President Fillmore to the removal of Native American tribes are as recorded in the literature on the colonisation of Hokkaidō. Charles Le Gendre's role in the Taiwan expedition of 1874 is described in the scholarship on that episode, including Shirane Seiji's work on colonial Taiwan. The 1895 competition among Michel Revon, William Montague Kirkwood and Henry Willard Denison, the consultation of Alpheus Todd, Hara Takashi's dissenting response, and the enactment of the enabling law of March 1896, are from Hennessey and from Wang Tay-sheng's *Legal Reform in Taiwan under Japanese Colonial Rule, 1895–1945* (Washington, 2000); the specific attribution of that statute to Kirkwood's advice comes from Wang at second hand and has not been checked against the drafting record. The management of hired foreigners — contracts, background checks, the shedding of generalists from the mid-1880s and the policy of replacement by Japanese — follows Hazel Jones's work on the *oyatoi*. Itō Hirobumi's constitutional study in Europe in 1882, the roles of Rudolf von Gneist, Lorenz von Stein

and Hermann Roesler, and the setting aside of Gustave Boissonade's draft civil code after controversy, are standard in the literature on the Meiji constitution and codes and are given here in summary.

On diffusion, Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (first edition 1962; fifth edition 2003), for the S-curve, the adopter categories, opinion leaders and change agents, and for the generalisation that earlier adopters exhibit greater *cosmopoliteness* — orientation outside the immediate social system. That generalisation is reported here from the standard summaries of Rogers's synthesis rather than from a particular study, and a reader building on it should go to the book. On organisational convergence, Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983), for the distinction between coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism, and for the finding that mimetic copying happens under uncertainty and for legitimacy rather than demonstrated performance.

On selection as the rival mechanism, Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* (Blackwell, 1990) and his earlier essay "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" (1985), for the argument that European state forms converged because military competition eliminated the units that could not build a war-making fiscal apparatus, and for the very large number of polities that ceased to exist in the process. The response offered in Part V — that selection sets the penalty while visibility supplies the choice set — is this paper's own and is offered as a distinction to be tested rather than as an established finding.

On imitation and its deviations, D. Eleanor Westney, *Imitation and Innovation: The Transfer of Western Organizational Patterns to Meiji Japan* (Harvard, 1987), for the three cases of the police, the postal service and the mass-circulation newspaper; for Kawaji Toshiyoshi's mission to Europe in 1872 and the

succession of British, French and German influences on the Japanese police; for the observation that the resulting force was more centralised than any of its models because no prior institution constrained it; and for the postal system's difficulties of integration with domestic regulatory structures. On the systematic character of a latecomer's deviations, Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Harvard, 1962), for the argument that late industrialisers substitute institutions — investment banks in Germany, the state in Russia — for prerequisites the pioneer accumulated gradually, and that the degree of substitution tracks the degree of lateness.

On the historiographical target, Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Bell, 1931), for the critique of writing history with reference to the present, sorting past actors into those who advanced and those who obstructed the outcome, and treating what happened as what had to happen.

On global convergence in the nineteenth century generally, C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* (Blackwell, 2004), which describes the period's growth of similar state forms, dress, bureaucratic practice and public institutions across very different societies as a set of connected uniformities rather than a diffusion outward from one centre. On the modularity of borrowed political forms, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1983), for the argument that the nation became a "modular" form capable of being transplanted, and for the concept of *official nationalism* — dynastic rulers adopting the popular nationalism that threatened them, in order to contain it. Anderson's book is used here for its account of transplantation only; its wider thesis about the origins of national consciousness is not relied upon.

The framework this paper belongs to is stated in its companion papers — on position logic, on the small contending apex, on how durable orders are set in place and come to run themselves, and, most directly, on how arrangements appear to spread as if

by a force in the air. Each of those, like this one, is written to stand alone.